

Luis Miguel: La serie, Class-Based Collective Memory, and Streaming Television in Mexico

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Netflix's first Spanish-language original series, *Club de cuervos* (2015–2019), was also its first original series for the Mexican market. Four years later, Netflix original content from Mexico includes multiple seasons of this acclaimed comedy along with insipid reality TV, middlebrow thrillers, and the Oscar-winning film *Roma* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2018). In February 2019, chief content officer Ted Sarandos announced that Netflix Mexico would produce fifty television shows and films over the following two years, making it the platform's international territory with the most targeted productions.¹ Given its standing in the Netflix ecosystem, what does this territory reveal about how a foreign subscription video-on-demand service interacts with a country's industries, politics, and cultural trends?

To answer this question, we must look at the first half of 2018, when one Netflix series captivated the cultural conversation in the country. *Luis Miguel: La serie* was an authorized, fictionalized depiction of the life of Mexican pop superstar Luis Miguel. It premiered on April 22 with a new episode every Sunday until July 15, paralleling the weekly schedule followed by coproducer Telemundo in the United States. The show received wide acclaim from critics and fans, bolstered the star image of its lead actor, Diego Boneta, and revitalized the public perception of the singer, who had fallen out of favor following numerous personal scandals and canceled tours. Yet it also proved a bellwether for another major national event: the election of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) as president and the overwhelming defeat of Mexico's longtime de facto ruling party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI).

The audience engagement during the show's run and the connections between that engagement and the political significance of AMLO's victory reveal an emergent class self-reflection in and through new media. For the middle- and upper-middle-class Mexicans who watched the show in its initial run, the weekly ritual of watching and commenting on social media tackled not only the content of the

1 John Hecht, "Netflix to Produce 50 Projects in Mexico," *Hollywood Reporter*, February 12, 2019, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/netflix-produce-50-projects-mexico-1185950>.

episodes but also viewers' recollection of the events therein, namely the move toward a neoliberal economy in the late 1980s in Mexico.² Such discussions foregrounded a dissatisfaction with the long history of power brokerage in Mexico and thus were akin to the rhetoric surrounding the presidential elections. These responses to *Luis Miguel: La serie* provide a sketch of the broader structure of feeling against the country's political and media elites emerging in the lead-up to the national elections. I do not mean to imply a causal relationship between the release of the Netflix series and the election of AMLO in July 2018. Rather, particular aspects of the reception of the show prefigure the reasons for supporting the eventual president and offer a window into how middle- and upper-middle-class Mexicans saw themselves, their recent past, and their future at this juncture in 2018.

Class is central to understanding the connection between the reception of the show and the emergent political landscape. Netflix is not yet widely available across Mexico. Access to high-speed internet service remains heavily stratified, with 85 percent access for households in the top 15 percent by income bracket and around 25 percent access for those in the lower 45 percent by income bracket.³ Netflix consumers thus tend to live in urban areas and earn above the country's median income. Likewise, the perception of Netflix's content in Mexico stands in opposition to that of national broadcasting giant Televisa, known for its traditional telenovelas and their negative class connotations. Although we cannot assume that it was watched by all sectors of the Mexican population, the case of *Luis Miguel: La serie* does help illustrate the reception implications of Netflix's class-stratified audiences, the enduring appeal of melodramatic genres in television, the political implications of viewer responses on social media, and how audiences may reflect on their positionality when encountering content from foreign streaming services.

Netflix operates within a class-stratified media ecology in a number of ways. Differential access to high-speed internet separates a population into hierarchical levels of online connectivity. Hardware costs further differentiate audiences into exclusively mobile and cross-platform segments, which are set up for various kinds of content. Critical engagement with television has also divided the medium into distinct patterns of taste. Commentary on the widely viewed traditional telenovelas has historically been, and continues to be, the purview of gossip rags. The television criticism found in more "serious" venues, such as the literary magazine *Letras libres* or business journal *El financiero*, skews toward foreign fare, particularly US dramas available in Mexico on

2 The notion of middle class used here borrows from Dennis Gilbert's conception, which spans "salaried professionals, managers, teachers, technicians, bureaucrats, and merchants . . . with household incomes at least 50 percent higher than the median household income" (13). Gilbert admits that this is a relative category, and one that fluctuates historically, but for the purposes of this argument it overlaps with the categories of people that would have access to Netflix. See Dennis Gilbert, *Mexico's Middle Class in the Neoliberal Era* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2007).

3 Asociación de Internet en México, "Estudio de infraestructura y adopción de las TIC's por la Población en México," November 28, 2016, <https://www.asociaciondeinternet.mx/es/component/remository/func-startdown/28/lang-es-es/>. For an extended discussion on the correlation of income and pay-TV adoption in Mexico and Brazil, see Joseph D. Straubhaar, Vinicio Sinta, Jeremiah Spence, and Vanessa de Macedo Higgins Joyce, "Changing Class Formations and Changing Television Viewing: The New Middle Class, Television and Pay Television in Brazil and Mexico, 2003–2013," *Les enjeux de l'information et de la communication* 17, no. 2 (2016): 207–223.

cable or streaming platforms. The politics of taste evidenced by such coverage further stratifies television content across class markers of social and cultural capital. None of these distinctions is determinantal, in the strict sense, but rather tends toward specific types of publics associated with streaming platforms. Netflix's image has played into these differential class connotations in the past, when the platform sought to differentiate itself from Televisa's streaming platform Blim.⁴ While discussions around *Luis Miguel: La serie* in print and social media did not address class in such explicit ways, viewers routinely referred to Televisa's status as the hegemonic power in national television and its role in maintaining social stratification.

The first season of *Luis Miguel: La serie* covers the artist's rise to fame in the late 1980s and the familial drama of his younger years, focusing heavily on the singer's troubled relationship with his father. Each episode includes a musical number where lead actor Diego Boneta performs one of Luis Miguel's hits. At first glance, there was nothing unique about this biographical drama. It falls within a rapidly expanding roster of Latin American biographical series created for Spanish-language audiences, such as Telemundo's *José José: El príncipe de la canción* (2018) and *Jenni Rivera: Mariposa de barrio* (2017); RCN Television's *Celia* (2015); and TNT Latin America's *Hasta que te conocí* (2016), which recounts the early years of Mexican superstar Juan Gabriel.

Because of Netflix's distribution agreement with Telemundo, Mexican audiences can also watch some of these other series on its platform. The generic similarities across these shows may have contributed to audience expectations for the Luis Miguel series. Being tied to a foreign streaming service rather than a legacy broadcast network also enhanced the presumed expectation of quality for the series. The show also carried with it aspects of Luis Miguel's persona, particularly the popular resignification of his music and personal style in recent decades with the subculture of *mirreyes*, a term associated with the offspring of the country's affluent elite who indulge in conspicuous consumption and tout their wealth on social media.⁵ The release later that summer of *Made in Mexico* (2018), Netflix's reality series about wealthy urban youth, suggests that the streaming service envisions at least part of its audience precisely within this demographic. These series allude to specific class dynamics within their narratives and in their assumed audiences.

The media and cultural studies scholar Jesús Martín-Barbero has long argued for the social function of television in Latin America and the medium's increased importance in an era of accelerated globalization. Understood as industry, technology, and narrative form, television encapsulates the contradictions of globalization and Latin American modernity. "The disproportionate amount of social space which the medium occupies," he argues, "is nevertheless proportional to the lack of political

4 For an extended explanation of this trend, including how Netflix's rebranding of foreign content as "original series" aided its distinction from Blim, see Juan Llamas-Rodríguez, "'Blim and Chill': Telenovelas and Class Ideologies in the Online Streaming Wars," *Flow: A Critical Forum on Media and Culture* 23, no. 2 (November 28, 2016), <http://www.flowjournal.org/2016/11/blim-and-chill-telenovelas-and-class-ideologies-in-the-online-streaming-wars-juan-llamas-rodriguez-university-of-california-santa-barbara/>.

5 For an overview on *mirreyes* in English, see David Agren, "The Brattiest Pack in Mexico," *Macleans*, April 3, 2015, <https://www.macleans.ca/society/life/the-brattiest-pack-in-mexico/>.

spaces for the expression and negotiation of social conflict.”⁶ Telenovelas are exemplary in this regard. Historically, the genre has been instrumental in the construction of national and regional identity in line with late-capital reorganizations of markets and communication networks. The power of television in general, and telenovelas in particular, lies in how the repetitive structure of the series mirrors the ritualistic dimensions of everyday life. In this repetitive structure, audiences become acculturated into particular habits and forms of belonging.⁷

Martín-Barbero’s insights find new relevance to the viewing practices and textual engagements of Netflix’s audiences in Mexico. During its thirteen-week run, the audience for *Luis Miguel: La serie* responded fervently on social media. Fans reacted positively to the series’ careful world building, particularly its introduction of household celebrities and notable public figures that defined the Mexican neoliberal era of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Online conversations about the show focused on behind-the-fiction content: tweets, blog posts, videos, and memes that shared excerpts from the real-life counterparts to whatever was depicted on that week’s episode. Twitter users also turned to the platform for longer, more incisive examinations of the political and social content depicted on the show. For instance, journalist Verónica Calderón tweeted that the fictionalization of the life of Luis Miguel, someone who was at the epicenter of many media and political power plays, provides a “veiled testimony” of Mexican life under the PRI’s rule.⁸ These critiques implicitly suggest that, by existing outside of the media establishment, the series offered a more incisive look at this recent history than if it had not been released on a foreign platform. The release of the series in 2018 allowed for a moment of recognition not only of the abuses of power in the past but also of the repressive strategies and silences that allowed those abuses to remain unchecked.

Twitter discussions around *Luis Miguel: La serie* alluded to how the elites’ complacency helped perpetuate the decades-long reign of the PRI. It is significant that those allusions came from those of the middle and upper middle class, because AMLO’s victory after three failed presidential runs relied on the support from the upper classes previously attached to the PRI and its conservative rival, the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN). Despite AMLO’s appeals to representing “the people” and despite his opposition’s including members of the country’s business and intelligentsia leaders, the election results revealed wide support for his candidacy from people in the top 15 percent income bracket.⁹ Understanding this turnout against the heated responses to the Netflix series reveals the class self-reckoning emerging for middle- and upper-middle-class Mexicans in the summer of 2018.

6 Jesus Martín-Barbero, “Narratives of Identity and Media Genres,” in *Latin American Popular Culture: Politics, Media, Affect*, ed. Geoffrey Kantaris and Rory O’Byrne (Suffolk, UK: Boydell & Brewer, 2013), 157.

7 Martín-Barbero, 159.

8 Verónica Calderón (@veronicacalderon), “Entonces por eso #LuisMiguelLaSerie no es solo una ‘telenovela’: es un testimonio quizá velado (digo, finalmente él estuvo en el epicentro de muchas de estas cosas). Y si se fijan, entre más viejos son los mexicanos, más miedo hay de hablar de ESOS TIEMPOS,” Twitter, May 23, 2018, 1:40 a.m., <https://twitter.com/veronicacalderon/status/999163248393031686>.

9 Ana Francisca Vega, “¿Quién votó por AMLO?,” *El Universal*, July 3, 2018, <https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/columna/ana-francisca-vega/nacion/quien-voto-por-amlo>.

Nowhere was this mix of episode commentary and political resonance better evidenced than in the account of @HilosPurpura. Created in April 2018 by a lawyer from Sinaloa who uses the pseudonym “Luisa Purpura,” the account amassed more than fourteen thousand followers during the show’s initial run.¹⁰ Every week, @HilosPurpura became a hub for weekly Twitter threads (*hilos* in Spanish) about the mysteries left unanswered by the series narrative, contentious dates in the historical record, and further background on the famous political and media figures appearing on the show. Luisa Purpura did not always offer sources to support her claims, but her followers accepted these as more than mere gossip, partly because her authority on such matters had already been established in previous threads.¹¹ Still, even the unattributed assertions by @HilosPurpura function as exemplars of how power operated under PRI rule. In the absence of official records, truth emerged from collective consciousness and the oral histories derived from it. The fact that strong collusion between state agencies and media companies has long been a feature of the PRI years means that no “official” record needs to be provided for claims about the time. Like the airing of widely known, carefully guarded secrets following an authoritarian regime, the social media post mobilizes viewers’ responses to the series as a truth-reckoning moment. These instances illustrate how watching *Luis Miguel: La serie* on Netflix functioned as a catalyst for collective self-reflection among the middle and upper classes.

The show’s first season occasioned a weekly nationwide, albeit class-stratified, moment of reckoning and deliberation. Its narrative was not full of “everyday” stories, as the telenovelas that Martín-Barbero studies are, but it was the nation’s recent history encapsulated in the life of one of its most notorious public figures. Every week, thousands of Mexicans gathered to watch a new episode in the life of Luis Miguel and then discussed the happenings as a reflection of the status of Mexican social life. As @HilosPurpura states, these posts functioned as the equivalent of “getting together to watch [our] telenovela and chit-chat [*echar el chal*].”¹² The importance of these online conversations evidences the cultural relevance of a structured ritual of weekly watching at a national level. So while Netflix is known for piloting the release of the entire season of a show at once, older practices of televisual consumption continue to hold the potential for productive cultural impacts.

The novelty and outsider status of Netflix within Mexico’s national media scene contributed to the impact of the show. The talent attached to the series allowed the press to fuel the discourse of “quality” by comparing it with similar US dramas.¹³

10 Melissa Sánchez, “Desde Culiacán, Hilos Púrpura desentraña la verdad de El Sol,” *Noroeste*, July 14, 2018, <https://www.noroeste.com.mx/publicaciones/view/desde-culiacan-hilos-purpura-desentra-na-la-verdad-de-el-sol-1135578>.

11 Her credibility also stems from the fact that she was endorsed by #VerificadoMX, a consortium of journalists committed to fact-checking the statements of the presidential candidates in the run-up to the election. For more on #VerificadoMX, see Andrea Rodríguez, “Verificado 2018: Using Collaborative Journalism to Fight Fake News in Mexico,” *World News Publishing Focus* (blog), *WAN-IFRA Americas*, April 3, 2018, <https://blog.wan-ifra.org/2018/04/03/verificado-2018-using-collaborative-journalism-to-fight-fake-news-in-mexico>.

12 Hilos Purpura (@HilosPurpura), “Hilos con millones de datos inútiles para que tengamos el equivalente a ver juntos nuestra novela del domingo y echar el chal,” Twitter, May 10, 2018, 10:57 a.m., <https://twitter.com/HilosPurpura/status/994592256140238848>.

13 Javier Merino and Marysabel E. Huston-Crespo, “¿Fue esta la clave del éxito de ‘Luis Miguel: La serie’?,” *CNN Español*, July 22, 2018, <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2018/07/22/fue-esta-la-clave-del-exito-de-luis-miguel-la-serie/>.

Likewise, that the series was produced by and streamed on a platform independent of the country's television duopoly lent credence to its reception as quality TV. I would argue that this status also allowed the show to become a runaway hit and, in turn, a text for collective reflection. Had it been produced or aired on Televisa, its reception would have been marred by the cultural association of the media powerhouse with the country's elite. That audiences perceive Televisa as a stand-in for national hegemonic power no doubt benefits the counter- or subversive appeal of any offering that is not attached to it.

The emergence of a new player in the national television arena as instigator of socially engaged content is not new or exclusive to Netflix. Two decades earlier, TVAzteca made its mark by counterprogramming Televisa with "the new telenovela," which was more politically relevant and offered higher production values.¹⁴ In this regard, *Luis Miguel: La serie* was in itself a fairly traditional content offering. Still, the series' success lay at the intersection of a number of factors: its association with a foreign platform, its release during a charged moment in the country's political climate, and the weekly viewing practice and social media discussions at a national level. The convergence of these factors created an opening for incisive social critique to emerge from the audience interactions.

It would be a mistake to overstate the impact of one Netflix show in a country where only a minority of the population has access to high-speed internet. At the same time, the cultural sensation and timing of *Luis Miguel: La serie* make it difficult to ignore. Popular media in this case is not *mass* media but media about "a people"—those of a specific socioeconomic class in one nation—and their cultural practices. The show's timeliness and its implication in the growing dissatisfaction with the ruling elite reveals the instances where the local emerges as streaming television content spreads across the globe. Indeed, sorting out what a Netflix show means requires asking questions about the intersection of textual features, audience demographics, and technological access in a particular place at a given time. Such situated analysis remains crucial when considering the local reception of transnational coproductions; the impact and relevance of *Luis Miguel* for US audiences watching concurrently on Telemundo, for instance, would not necessarily have tied watching the show to revisiting the old wounds under the PRI's rule.

Netflix's incursion into each of the almost two hundred countries it now operates in has been met with various policy oppositions, infrastructural blocks, and social negotiations. Mapping these across various national and local settings illustrates the variegated online streaming sphere. In this case study, the convergence of content, platform, and context reveals as much about the animus in Mexico in the summer of 2018 as it does about the fluidity of identity markers for analysis of contemporary television. As Anna Cristina Pertierra and Graeme Turner argue, "The platforms used have changed, and the structure and viability of the nation state has changed, but there

14 Guillermo Orozco, "Entre espectáculo, mercado y política," in *Telenovelas en México: Nuestras íntimas extrañas* (Mexico City: Delphi, 2011), 211. See also John Sinclair and Joseph Straubhaar, *Latin American Television Industries* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 52.

remains a strong, if altered, relationship between television and national identity.”¹⁵ Studying streaming television in a transnational context requires contending with this changing relationship to national identity as well as the differential development of digital media across the world. The transnational articulations of streaming television provide an opportunity to rethink how infrastructures, texts, and stratified audiences intermingle at multiple scales. *

15 Anna Cristina Pertierra and Graeme Turner, *Locating Television: Zones of Consumption* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 53.